

Russell Kirk: Champion of the Permanent Things



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Defining Conservatism Series

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"He lifted with his own hands our forgotten patrimony from dusty oblivion."

Though typically thought of as a founder of post-World War II conservatism, Russell Kirk's great accomplishment was less bounded by a parochial time period. This accomplishment was to establish the continuity of conservative thought from Edmund Burke (in some ways, much further back) to the present day. He was, after all, a champion of the "permanent things" spoken of by T.S. Eliot and revived in conservative thought an understanding of the debt our society owes to the past and the legacy we must pass on to our descendants.

Dr. Kirk was born at Plymouth Michigan, in 1918. He taught, "that a conservative disposition always displays piety toward the wisdom of its ancestors." He lived with a strong sense of ancestors, writing of himself in the third person: "Reticent though he remained, he was grateful, deep within, to the dead ancestors and the living family: he knew he would have been nothing without them." He noted on a number of occasions the influence of his family during his early life. "He never knew the tyranny of the 'age-peer group,' having always the counsel and companionship of family-especially his grandfather." His mother introduced him to Nathaniel Hawthorne, James Fenimore Cooper and Walter Scott. Of his grandfather he wrote: "That communion with an old gentleman I admired infinitely, and our reflections that day upon the living past, were among the influences that have prevented me from becoming an evangel of Modernity." He "lived much of his life at his ancestral place, Piety Hill, in Mecosta, Michigan."

After military service, he earned a doctor of letters from St. Andrews in Scotland. He had previously earned degrees from Michigan State University and Duke University. His friends included T.S. Eliot, Donald Davidson, Richard Weaver, Robert Nisbet, Malcolm Muggeridge and Flannery O'Connor.

He married Annette Yvonne Cecile Courtemanche and they were the parents of four daughters. In the two years preceding their marriage, his wife reported that he wrote long daily letters. One of his daughters wrote of him: "Agrarian life was well understood and appreciated by my father. Under the dimming September sun he and I worked together planting and pruning. He loved to watch the progress his labors had achieved; the growth of new life from his ancestral earth. The most precious objects in my father's life were his family, his home, and his five acres of land." His daughters also told of the stories he told them at the fireplace. His wife said of him: "Being with Russell was never boring. Because he viewed life as a perpetual adventure and loved so deeply, we were continually surprised by joy."

Dr. Kirk passed away April 29, 1994.

His voluminous writing, in both nonfiction and fiction, is uniformly excellent (the Russell Kirk Center has a helpful bibliography online). Many of his lectures at the Heritage Foundation are available online as are articles written in *Modern Age*, the journal he founded.

A helpful starting place is the majestic *The Conservative Mind*, his most well known book. It surveys conservative thought starting with Edmund Burke and ending with T.S. Eliot, with a compelling and imaginative stress on Burke's influence throughout. His edited volume *The Portable Conservative Reader* could be used as a companion volume to make available extracts of the work he so powerfully describes in *The Conservative Mind*. If one were to read these two books, they would have as useful an introduction to conservative thought as might be possible. More than useful, though, the work is inspiring, reminding us of the great heritage of conservative thought to which we are heirs.

Another example of Dr. Kirk's powerful intellectual influence can be gained by reading his masterful *Roots of American Order*. Like so many of his books, this could serve as an excellent textbook for a course on the intellectual origins of the United States Constitution. It forcefully argues for an understanding of the Constitution in the context of a long development of Western thought, emphasizing the continuity of the American tradition with classical and Judeo-Christian teaching.

Perhaps most important in our day, when erstwhile "conservatives" think of conservatism as a political agenda stressing a hawkish foreign policy and a business friendly domestic policy, is Dr. Kirk's clarification of the nature of conservatism.

Dr. Kirk eschewed ideology and noted that "[t]he American order of our day was not founded upon ideology." He observed that "order is a kind of organic growth, developing slowly over many centuries; it cannot be created by public proclamation."

Instead of ideology, the conservative would be guided by the accumulated wisdom of the past and would fight against attempts to discard that wisdom in the spirit of innovation. In the foreword to the seventh edition of *The Conservative Mind*, Dr. Kirk said, "the folk called 'conservative' join in the resistance to the destruction of old patterns of life, damage to the footings of the civil social order, and reduction of human striving to material production and consumption." From Edmund Burke, he had learned that "the continuity of a nation's establishments and institutions, the true consensus of many generations, must not be imperiled by the rash innovations of a talented reformer; for though the individual is foolish, the species is wise."

In 1993, Dr. Kirk outlined "ten conservative principles" that serve as an excellent summary of his thought and of the understandings of traditional conservatives: (1) "the conservative believes that there exists an enduring moral order. . . . human nature is a constant, and moral truths are permanent"; (2) "the conservative adheres to custom, convention and continuity"; (3) "conservatives believe in what may be called the principles of prescription"; (4) "conservatives are guided by their principle of prudence"; (5) "conservatives pay attention to the principle of variety"; (6) "conservatives are chastened by their principle of imperfection"; (7) "conservatives are persuaded that freedom and property are closely linked"; (8) "conservatives uphold voluntary community, quite as they oppose involuntary collectivism"; (9) "the conservative perceives the need for prudent restraints upon power and upon human passions"; (10) "the thinking conservative understands that permanence and change must be recognized and reconciled in a vigorous society."

It is not often that an individual combines intellectual excellence, moral sagacity and personal goodness. America experienced this blessing in the person of Russell Kirk.

Selected Resources and Bibliography

The Russell Kirk Center for Cultural Renewal (www.kirkcenter.org)
Intercollegiate Studies Institute (www.isi.org)
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Russell Kirk, *The Politics of Prudence* (1993)
The Portable Conservative Reader (Russell Kirk, editor 1982)
Russell Kirk, *The Roots of American Order* (1974)
Russell Kirk, *Eliot and His Age* (1971)
Russell Kirk, *Edmund Burke: A Genius Reconsidered* (1967)
Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot* (1953)
Russell Kirk, *John Randolph of Roanoke: A Study in American Politics* (1951)
James E. Person, Jr., *Russell Kirk: A Critical Biography of a Conservative Mind* (1999)
The Unbought Grace of Life: Essays in Honor of Russell Kirk (James E. Person, Jr., editor 1994)

Endnotes:

- ¹ Ken Cribb quoted in Annette Kirk, *Life With Russell Kirk*, The Russell Kirk Memorial Lectures, The Heritage Foundation (November 17, 1975).
- ² Annette Kirk, *Life With Russell Kirk*, The Russell Kirk Memorial Lectures, The Heritage Foundation (November 17, 1975).
- ³ Russell Kirk, "The Quickening of Imagination" *Modern Age* 280, 287 (Fall 1990).
- ⁴ Russell Kirk, "The Quickening of Imagination" *Modern Age* 280, 287 (Fall 1990).
- ⁵ Russell Kirk, "Ten Exemplary Conservatives," Heritage Foundation Lecture, December 11, 1986.
- ⁶ "About Russell Kirk" The Russell Kirk Center for Cultural Renewal at www.kirkcenter.org/kirkbio.html.
- ⁷ Annette Kirk, *Life With Russell Kirk*, The Russell Kirk Memorial Lectures, The Heritage Foundation (November 17, 1975).
- ⁸ Annette Kirk, *Life With Russell Kirk*, The Russell Kirk Memorial Lectures, The Heritage Foundation (November 17, 1975).
- ⁹ The *Modern Age* archives are graciously made available by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute (www.isi.org) are well worth visiting. Dr. Kirk also wrote an amusing account of an effort to secure financial support for the journal in "Right Reason Does Not Pay" *Modern Age* 228 (Summer/Fall 1982).
- ¹⁰ Russell Kirk, *The Roots of American Order* 9 (Open Court 1974).
- ¹¹ Russell Kirk, *The Roots of American Order* 473 (Open Court 1974).
- ¹² Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind* xv (7th ed. Regnery 1995).
- ¹³ Russell Kirk, *Edmund Burke: A Genius Reconsidered* 80 (Arlington House 1967).
- ¹⁴ Russell Kirk, "Ten Conservative Principles" in *The Politics of Prudence* (ISI Books 1993).